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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: ANBAR PRT: FROM HEMATOLOGIST TO POLITICIAN, ANBAR
PROVINCIAL COUNCIL CHAIRMAN ATTEMPTS TO NAVIGATE
POLITICAL, TRIBAL FAULT LINES IN ANBAR

Classified By: Acting Anbar PRT Team Leader COL William Dwiggins
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is an Anbar PRT reporting cable.

Summary

12. (C) The past year has been a turbulent one for Anbar Provincial Council Chairman Abdulsalam Abdullah al-Ani. While he began the year presiding over an absentee Provincial Council (PC) that met in Baghdad due to insurgent threats, he took advantage of the significantly improved security situation in Anbar Province to lead the PC back to the provincial capital of Ramadi with Multi-National Forces-West (MNF-W) assistance. He has also made progress in the past two months on his two signature political issues- detainees and war damage compensation- working with Coalition Forces (CF) and Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi on a special Ramadan detainee release program and helping secure a promise from Deputy Prime Minister Barhem Saleh for \$50 million in housing compensation for Anbari citizens during a September economic reconstruction forum in Ramadi. Nevertheless, Abdulsalam faces criticism from other Anbari leaders for his long absences from Anbar and for his alleged disconnect with daily events in the province. Struggling to contend with the rise of the anti-insurgent tribal "Sahawa al-Iraq," or Awakening Council of Iraq (SAI) led by Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha, the PC Chairman's political future in Anbar, and that of his Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), is in question. While the IIP swept the provincial elections in Anbar in 2005, the PC's legitimacy has consistently been questioned by opponents because less than two percent of Anbar's eligible voters participated in the elections due to a Sunni elections boycott. In comments to his PRT "liaison officer" (LNO) over the past year, the PC Chairman paints a portrait of a physician with little political experience warming to the leadership role he has taken on in the post-Saddam era, but struggling to contend with the political and tribal fault lines that mark his province. End Summary.

From Physician to PC Chairman

13. (C) Anbar Provincial Council Chairman Abdulsalam Abdullah was a physician during the Saddam Hussein regime. Born in al-Qaim in western Anbar Province near the Syrian border, Abdulsalam practiced hematology in Baghdad and Anbar. He served as the Dean of al-Anbar Medical College until 2003. The married father of six lists 1965 as his birth date in his passport, but told Poloff that he is "closer to 50 years old." After the fall of the Saddam regime, which Abdulsalam claims he never supported, he was among a group of educated Anbari professionals who joined the IIP, a member of the Sunni-dominated Tawafuq bloc, and sought a political role in the province. "After the fall of the old regime, we wanted to get some people together who were educated and smart, and

who cared about the future of Iraq and would work within the system to improve the situation in Anbar," he recently told Poloff. While his IIP swept the provincial elections in Anbar in 2005, the PC's legitimacy has consistently been questioned by opponents because less than two percent of Anbar's eligible voters participated in the elections. This low voter turnout in Anbar was the result of a Sunni elections boycott.

¶4. (C) Abdulsalam often states that he tries to lead the Provincial Council "by consensus." "If two people on the council are fighting, I am the man they come to for solving the problem, because usually the two men fighting both respect me," he once boasted. Indeed, the PC Chairman has often played the role of referee at PC meetings. After stopping a shouting match between Anbar Governor Maamoun Sami Rasheed and Ramadi Mayor Latif Ayada at a May PC meeting, Abdulsalam remarked: "You see what I have to do in order to make sure everyone gets along and works together." He sells himself as a "moderate independent," who is not beholden to his IIP membership. "You know I am a leader in the IIP, but in Anbar I am an Anbari first and I work to help my province before my party," he claims. His supporters on the Provincial Council cite his affable personality as one of his strongest qualities. "He is good for the Provincial Council because he talks to people nicely, he is always smiling, he is friends with everybody. He tries to bring people together," according to PC member Ashour Saleh.

Leading an Absentee Council back to Ramadi

¶5. (C) The Provincial Council's first two years in office were marked by insurgent threats and intimidation as heavy

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fighting took place in Fallujah, Ramadi, and other Anbari cities. Some PC members were kidnapped or killed, and many more were threatened. The PC Chairman and many PC members moved their families to Baghdad, Syria, or Jordan. In March 2006, following a sustained attack on the PC's meeting space in the Government Center in downtown Ramadi, the PC fled to Baghdad. Holding PC meetings in an office space in Baghdad's Yarmouk neighborhood, Abdulsalam struggled to keep the council relevant to Anbari politics.

¶6. (C) Working closely with the Governor, who remained at work in Ramadi, and a loyal group of about five prominent members of the PC, the PC Chairman lobbied the GOI for political, economic and security assistance for the province. He relied heavily on the support of his political patrons in the IIP, including Vice President Hashimi and Minister of State for Foreign Relations Dr. Rafe al-Essawi. In 2006, al-Essawi created the "Anbar Coordination Committee" to advocate Anbari issues in the GOI. Pointing to the creation of the committee as one of his most significant accomplishments, the PC Chairman recently said: "The Anbar Coordination Committee was important, because we needed someone to push for assistance to the province against a central government that was completely ignoring Sunnis and Anbar Province." The Anbar Coordination Committee has convened several times in Baghdad to work on issues ranging from security to economic development, with mixed results. While Abdulsalam contends the committee is effective because it provides an organized mechanism through which to lobby on behalf of the province, he and other Anbari leaders consistently argue that the GOI still "does not support Anbar Province enough, and when it promises things we do not see the results."

¶7. (C) As Anbari tribes coalesced against the insurgency in the latter half of 2006 and the security situation in Anbar Province dramatically improved through 2007, Abdulsalam took advantage of an offer of MNF-W assistance to move the PC back to Ramadi. "It is clear that the time has come to move the council back to Anbar, and to show the Anbari people we are

close to them," the PC Chairman said in April. MNF-W offered to fly members of the Provincial Council back from Baghdad for meetings on Forward Operating Base Blue Diamond outside Ramadi until the PC's meeting space in downtown Ramadi was renovated. "At first, the PC members were nervous about going back to Ramadi, but when they saw that the situation had improved, they started going back to Anbar more often and without the assistance of coalition forces," he said. On July 26, Abdulsalam convened the first Provincial Council meeting at Ramadi's Government Center in 16 months, marking the return of provincial government to the province.

But Criticisms of His Absences from Anbar Continue

18. (C) Despite leading the PC back to Ramadi, Abdulsalam is consistently criticized by other Anbari leaders for his long absences from the province in both Baghdad and Amman. For instance, between mid-August and mid-October, he spent most of his time in the Iraqi and Jordanian capitals intermittently visiting Ramadi for PC meetings on three occasions. "He is the PC Chair of Baghdad or maybe Amman," Vice Governor for Planning Othman Hummadi recently commented wryly. Other PC members also note his absences, with some complaining that the PC Chairman is not informed of daily events in Anbar when he is in Baghdad or Amman.

19. (C) Before a recent trip from Baghdad to Ramadi, the PC Chairman defended his absences from Anbar to Poloff. "I am not on vacation in Baghdad. I am always working for Anbar. In Baghdad, I am working to get more assistance from the central government, and this is essential for Anbar. In Amman, I am meeting with Anbari sheikhs who are living there, working to bring the tribes of the province together with the provincial government." Abdulsalam also cited concerns for his safety in Ramadi, noting that he is not from the provincial capital and cannot rely on protection by his family or tribe there. "I know al-Qaeda is trying to kill me. But I work in ways so that they do not find me. By the time they find out I am in Ramadi, I am already gone," he explained. Despite his claims to the contrary, some Anbari leaders believe the reason the PC Chairman spends so much time in Baghdad is that he is angling for a position in the central government (his brother, Mohammed al-Ani, is a Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Oil, Industry, and Minerals). "Maybe Hashimi or Rafe will give him a job in the government in Baghdad, and this is what he really wants," a PC member told Poloff following an October 23 PC meeting in Ramadi.

Progress on Signature Political Issues:
Detainees and Compensation

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110. (C) Citing evidence of his work on the national level, Abdulsalam frequently points to progress on his signature political issues- detainees and war damage compensation. For months, the PC Chairman peppered his public comments with requests for GOI and USG assistance on these two issues. After CF and Hashimi announced a special Ramadan detainee release program before the September 12 beginning of the Islamic holy month, the PC Chairman claimed victory on a key issue. "You know we have been working for months on this issue, and it is important because so many of the detainees are Sunni and from Anbar," he said. "Now I have something to show the people of Anbar, a result for all our work." The PC Chairman was also enthusiastic about the announcement by Deputy Prime Minister Barhem Saleh at the September 6 Anbar Forum II, an economic reconstruction forum in Ramadi attended by the Ambassador, Hashimi, Saleh, and Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi, of USD 50 million in housing compensation for Anbaris whose homes were damaged in fighting in the province. "These are the kinds of things that the Anbari people will notice, and they will know that the Provincial Council worked to get these things from the Iraqi government," he said

following the event. "If the Anbari people see improvements in their daily lives with the improved security situation, support for the insurgency will collapse."

PC Chairman Struggles with Tribal Challenge

¶11. (C) Despite these victories, the PC Chairman has struggled with the challenge posed to his authority by influential tribal leaders in Anbar, foremost among them the anti-insurgent tribal coalition Awakening Council of Iraq (SAI) led by Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha. Abdulsalam's relationship with SAI has shifted repeatedly over the past year. High points in the relationship included the November 2006 agreement between the PC and the SAI, coordinated by al-Essawi's Anbar Coordination Committee and the Prime Minister's office, to add eight seats to the Anbar Provincial Council for SAI members. The agreement was meant to make the PC more representative, and increase cooperation between the provincial government and the tribes fighting the insurgency.

At other times he has been wary of the SAI's growing influence, arguing that its tribal members are not educated and not capable of "government in a modern society." "The tribes are important, but they are not the only political actors in Anbar Province and the Abu Risha is not the only tribe in Anbar," he frequently says. In a moment of frustration this past summer, he lashed out at the late Sheikh Sattar Abu Risha stating: "You will see that if the US supports Sheikh Sattar, everything that your government and the American soldiers have worked for will be lost."

¶12. (C) In recent months, the PC Chairman has attempted to reach out to the SAI in a bid to secure their support behind the withdrawal of the Tawafuq bloc from the GOI cabinet. He has worked to bring Hashimi and al-Essawi, along with other IIP and Tawafuq members like Adnan Duleimi, to Anbar Province to meet with tribal leaders. He has also met with Anbari tribal leaders living in Amman "working to unite all the tribes behind us." Speaking from Amman moments after reports of Sheikh Sattar Abu Risha's assassination in Ramadi on September 13, Abdulsalam was visibly shaken. He spoke highly of Sheikh Sattar's contributions to security in Anbar. The PC Chair often refers to Sattar's brother Sheikh Ahmad, who currently leads the SAI, as "my close friend." Despite their personal friendship, however, Abdulsalam is wary of the challenge posed by Sheikh Ahmad to his leadership in Anbar. "I have spoken frankly to Sheikh Ahmad, reminding him that we have to focus on unity between all the parties in Anbar. He cannot just promote the SAI and forget everyone else. Anbar cannot just be about Sheikh Ahmad," he recently said in Ramadi.

Comment: Political Future in Question

¶13. (C) While the Anbar PC Chairman has warmed to his political role in the post-Saddam era, the former physician's political skills are being tested by the rise of the SAI. His ability to secure the continued support of the SAI and other tribal leaders behind his leadership of the Provincial Council will be crucial to his political future in the province. The PC Chairman often refers to himself as "just a doctor, and not a politician," but bridging tribal and political fault lines in Anbar will require significant political leadership on his part. At times, the effort seems to exhaust him. He has stated to Poloff on several occasions that he may not run again in provincial elections tentatively scheduled for 2008. Even if he did run, his electoral

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success and that of his IIP is far from certain. In the meantime, however, Abdulsalam will continue to be an important player in Anbari politics in his post as Provincial Council Chairman as the province moves beyond the days of the insurgency into a critical period of political and economic development. "I know that there are terrorists who would

like to kill me," Abdulsalam said during an October visit to Ramadi. "But I am not afraid of dying. I just hope that I live long enough to see Anbar Province successful after all the efforts we have tried to improve the situation." End Comment.
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